

# Focus Varietal: Viognier

Viognier (VEE-ohn-yay) forms an important component of our *Esprit de Beaucastel Blanc*, and the base of our new 2002 *Côtes de Tablas Blanc*. It contributes aromatics of peaches, apricots and violets to the blend, as well as a clean, chalky crispness in the mouth.

## Early History

Viognier is historically grown in the Northern Rhône valley, and reaches its peak in the tiny appellations of Condrieu and Château Grillet. The precise historical origin of the varietal is unknown, but many believe it dates back to the Roman Empire. According to one story, Emperor Probus imported Viognier into Condrieu from Dalmatia (in present-day Croatia) in 281 AD as a means of replacing the vineyards destroyed by Emperor Vespasian. Legend has it that Vespasian tore up the Condrieu vineyards after the locals revolted, a revolt which he attributed to drinking too much of the native wine.

Regardless of how the varietal originally arrived in Condrieu, historical records confirm that Viognier was grown in the area during the Roman Empire. When the Romans were forced out of Gaul in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, the vines remained uncultivated for centuries but were revived by locals in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century. The varietal spread to neighboring Château Grillet, and from there to the papal palace at Avignon in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century.

## Viognier in California

Once found almost exclusively in the northern Rhône appellations of Condrieu and Château Grillet, Viognier is becoming increasingly popular around the world. American growers, led by pioneers such as Calera and Joseph Phelps, brought Viognier into the United States

in small quantities in the late 1980s. Almost simultaneously, other American growers brought over what they thought were Roussanne cuttings from the Rhône Valley, which were then propagated and planted in vineyards all over California. Years later, in 1998, those vines were identified as Viognier, not Roussanne – a discovery which led to confusion, relabeling, and several lawsuits. We avoided this confusion by importing all of our vine cuttings directly



from  
Château  
de Beaucastel;  
the Tablas Creek  
Roussanne and  
Viognier are certified clones, tested by the USDA, and declared virus-free.

Viognier is a reasonably difficult grape to grow, as it is somewhat more prone to disease than other varieties and can be unpredictable in its yield. It is, however, reasonably drought resistant, enabling it to thrive at Tablas Creek, where we dry farm as much as possible. The varietal flowers and ripens early, and is usually the first varietal harvested. Because Viognier flowers so

early in the season, it is very susceptible to spring frosts; the frost-protection fans installed in the Viognier growing block at the vineyard have been important. The vines have medium-sized leaves, with small clusters of small, deep yellow berries that produce straw-gold colored wines.

## Flavors and Aromas

The distinctive aroma of peaches, apricots, and violets is a hallmark of Viognier. Its highly aromatic nose is complemented by moderate acidity and flavors of peaches and minerals in the mouth.

The varietal has thrived in the warm climate and limestone-clay soils of Tablas Creek. On the nine acres we had in production in 2002, we harvested approximately 17 tons of Viognier, which is about 20% of our white Rhône production.

Viognier is the key component of the *Côtes de Tablas Blanc*, where it provides exuberant floral and stone fruit characteristics to the wine. In the years in which we make a single varietal Viognier, we choose lots that emphasize minerality and acidity to balance the grape's natural richness.